

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



A Plant with Pedigree & Pizzazz

For those of us with a drop or two of chlorophyll in our veins, propagating and sharing plants with friends and neighbors is second nature. You might think of it as hand-me-down horticulture.

One of my most bizarre and entrancing pass-along plants is the Orchid Cactus (*Epiphyllum oxypetalum*), often erroneously called “Night Blooming Cereus” or “Queen of the Night.” The Orchid Cactus currently sprawling throughout my office is tropical in appearance, with extremely long, fleshy “leaves,” which are actually flattened stems, similar in appearance to a giant Christmas cactus. My companion started out as a several-inch long cutting and grew to almost five feet in height and width in just one summer. Today, after a recent severe pruning, it perches atop a bookcase, spreading out a host of improbably long, wavy fingers that menace unwary visitors.

The simple truth is that my treasured *Epiphyllum* is weird looking — so much so that some coworkers have nicknamed it Audrey II, inspired by the man-eating alien in “Little Shop of Horrors.” Fortunately, this specimen has no appetite for flesh — or much of anything else.

During the winter, it survives handsomely with no fertilizer and a simple sip of water once every several weeks, making it an extremely easy plant to cultivate indoors, especially for people who routinely kill other, more sensitive houseplants.

As its name implies, the Orchid Cactus shares a kinship with the spectacular orchids and bromeliads, which show off amid the steamy jungles of Central and South America. Like those species, it can be found tucked into mossy, compost-filled nooks and branch angles of trees, sending out aerial roots for support and nutrients.

Its proper botanical name, *Epiphyllum*, means upon-the-leaf, referring to the plant’s production of flowers along the margins of its flattened stems. And what flowers!

Orchid Cactus fanciers are generally more than willing to overlook the plant’s gawky, expansive nature if only to enjoy a single bloom once each year — although more mature plants can produce up to five flowers at a time. To add to the drama, the *Epiphyllum* blossom opens only at night, usually soon after sundown in mid- to late summer, taking several thrilling hours to open completely — and then close again forever.



The author’s *Epiphyllum* in bloom shortly after midnight, approximately nine aromatic inches across.

The nocturnal performance features a creamy white alien abstraction, often up to eight or nine inches in diameter, complete with rose-colored "tendrils" or tepals, pale green stamens and large butter-yellow lobes. The blossom exudes a warm, somewhat musky aroma easily capable of filling an entire house until sunrise.

The whole affair is extremely sensual, from the anticipation inspired by the bud as it swells like a milky balloon to the slow motion fan dance of the flower opening, releasing its rather indefinable fragrance, and then finally closing.

Some Epiphyllum fans actually throw impromptu parties to celebrate this magical event, while the rest of us are content to watch the show with a glass of wine and soft candlelight.

One of the most interesting, although possibly apocryphal, tales surrounding the plant comes from my friend, garden writer and editor Kathleen Fisher, who also potted up the cutting that became Audrey II.

Kathy was scheduled to attend a Garden Writers Conference in Philadelphia at the same time her Epiphyllum was slated to bloom. Without hesitation, she packed up her unwieldy companion, secured it in her van and drove to the conference. Rumors of a late-night soiree, bottles of Pinot Grigio, and a steady stream of garden writers making a pilgrimage to Kathy's hotel room to enjoy the botanical spectacle are unsubstantiated.

Kathy's plant is itself an offshoot from a sizeable plant owned by David Ellis, editor of *The American Gardener*, and is furthermore the progeny of a living room-sized plant nurtured by a neighbor of David's, a German goldsmith who escaped the Holocaust. The plant in my office, which normally occupies a shaded and respectable portion of my rooftop garden, has subsequently been propagated and shared with about seven other friends and colleagues, with several more awaiting the most recent fruits of some very necessary pruning efforts.

In fact, in exchange for one rooted cutting, a coworker provided me with a plant from his native India coincidentally called "Queen of the Night," another fragrant nocturnal bloomer, which also propagates easily and is slated for distribution to other friends.

The unique history and pedigree of these hand-me-down plants seems to keep growing as quickly as the plants themselves, making these green specimens interesting from both a human and a horticultural perspective, and as equally endearing for the personal connections they inspire.

More Information

EPI News, Box 126127, San Diego, CA 92112.

The Epi-Gram, 1801 West 27th, San Pedro, CA 90732.

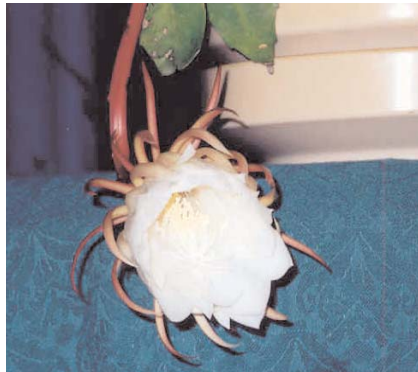
The Bulletin (Epiphyllum Society of America), Box 1395, Monrovia, CA 91017; www.epiphyllum.org.

Epiphyllum Basics II, Sean Minogue, 1992.

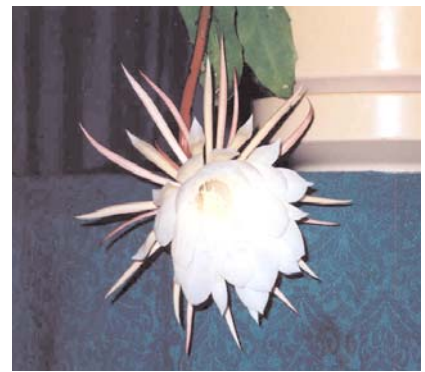
Epiphyllum - Glen's Epi Page: www.missouri.edu/~extgrice/nbc/



Four-inch long buds start opening at midnight.



As they open, the house fills with perfume.



Once open, blooms last until just before dawn.



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